



Making the pandemic palatable, one food post at a time

By Saraswathi Bellur

I eased into the quarantine rather gently, since it followed close on the heels of spring break. A few more days at home, suddenly did not seem like such a bad idea. Just before spring break began, I took a picture of an out-of-stock notice for Purell in our local Walgreens aisle. The notice even had a typo that I felt very smug about catching. For a brief moment, I considered posting a photo of that typo-ridden notice on social media, with some clever remark. Thankfully, better judgment prevailed! The magnitude of the situation, with drug stores running out of hand sanitizers, toilet paper, and other essentials, had not really sunk in. I dismissed it as a typical northeast response, where everyone hoards milk, bread, TP, and gas because a huge storm is coming. In less than 24-hrs, this, like the impending storm would have dissipated into a minor and temporary inconvenience, or so I thought.

Quarantine, however, was no minor or temporary inconvenience. As days rolled by, juggling work deadlines, keeping a 5-yr old meaningfully occupied, managing household chores, and a whole new routine, the enormity of the issue slowly grew on me. As I read each news story, scrolled endlessly past social media feeds, watched the news, and exchanged messages fervently, denial soon turned into despair. Every now

and then, the fragility and futility of human endeavors reared its ugly head, making me briefly question if anything we do was worth it...if it could all be taken away from us by an army of invisible microorganisms?! Even as these larger-than-life questions loomed above, I fell into a lockdown “routine”. In between teaching online classes, parenting, submitting a grant, attempting to homeschool a kindergartner, exams and grading, and bingeing on Schitt’s Creek for comic relief...I found a rhythm that was workable, if not fully desirable.

Amidst all this, there was one aspect of lockdown life that stood out – rather jarringly from everything else that was going on — and that was food! Everywhere I looked, people were making elaborate meals, baking bread from scratch, taking pictures of food that they had prepared, trading recipes, posting them on social media, ad infinitum! I slowly realized that this was not just about making elaborate meals or even making them more often than usual, but it was really the *sharing* and the sense of *community* that emerged out of all this that had taken on so much meaning! A very close friend of mine had created a food album on Facebook and had invited several of her friends (including myself) to contribute to this food album. Being an avowed foodie, I dove into this opportunity with great eagerness. Suddenly, amidst everything, I was cooking different meals, taking pictures, and painstakingly making sure they were somewhat Insta-worthy, and happily perusing the posts of other food-photo contributors! At first, it seemed curious and somewhat out-of-place even, to participate in this pandemic food culture. When everything else was so bleak, why was I (and others) engaged in a

celebration of food?! Even as I made more and shared more, it became increasingly apparent how therapeutic the whole idea and process was. For one, food is intimately tied to life and living. And when the world around us has been shaking with losses of any kind, including precious lives, perhaps food was a way for many of us to cope, to find the energy to continue to nurture and nourish, to hold on to a semblance of “normal” when a lot of things were challenging what that “normal” meant. I had a few friends threatening (jokingly, I hope!) to unfollow me on Facebook because they couldn’t take the onslaught of food pictures that showed up on their news feed! While it was not my intention to inflict food-envy (if there is such a thing?!) on others, it was a way in which I was trying to compensate for the absence of social connections in a time of social distancing. Many of our weekends, pre-pandemic, would be spent with good food and good company. Now that good company was taken away, good food remained to provide solace. It also occurred to me that making different meals and looking forward to everything it entailed, (e.g., making a shopping list, looking up ingredients, browsing through novel recipes, etc.) was more or less the only thing that broke the monotony of life in lockdown.

As an immigrant, food is a very big part of my culture and my roots. Preparing home food evokes innumerable memories of loved ones back home (parents, relatives, friends, families, neighborhoods, communities) all tied together in a veritable feast of colors, flavors, aromas, and tastes that make life worth living! Looking up recipes that have been passed on from one generation to another, exchanging notes with my

mother, my aunts, cousins, in-laws and friends was a fully reassuring, reuniting experience that defied the confines of physical (and temporal) distancing. The Hindu Upanishads celebrate “annam” (food) as “Brahman” (the Divine). The presiding goddess, “matha” (mother) Annapurna (filled with food), is the primordial maternal figure who nourishes her offspring everywhere. It is no surprise then that food has been a truly life-affirming preoccupation for several people during this crisis. I know several people who rushed to raise funds for their local food pantries. Many individuals contributed (and continue to contribute) to local hospitals by sponsoring meals to medical personnel, as a way of expressing their gratitude. Celebrity chefs offered free online cooking classes. Little kids chipped in with meal prep. Families used this as an opportunity to come together, to explore, to surprise, to delight, to entice, and to celebrate the opportunity to “give” of oneself. As Saint Francis of Assisi put it succinctly, “For it is in giving that we receive”. And this could not be truer when it comes to all forms of love, of which, food is but one manifestation.

